

Opera Supers of Iowa City Newsletter

Volume Three, Number 3

January 1988

Arthur Canter, Editor
30 Brookfield Dr., Iowa City, Iowa 52240

Next Meeting: Monday, February 22, 1988 at 7:00 pm in the lounge of the Music Building.*

(*Note: change in meeting time due to Iowa Caucus.)

Letter from the Editor

We are back to press after the holidays and must begin to orient ourselves toward the support of the Spring production of *Costi fan tutte*. As in past productions of the University Opera Theater, we will be looking for help in diverse areas: backstage and production functions where appropriate, publicity, educating the public, promoting ticket sales, food for promotional parties and for the *strike* party, and learning more about the opera ourselves. We should also be prepared to enjoy ourselves as we fulfill the role of Supers.

Plan now to reserve the dates for the opera presentation: April 29th at 8:00 p.m. and May 1st at 2:00 p.m. Many Supers *do* attend both performances as doing so provides the opportunity to hear different casts. Four roles are available for supernumeraries as gondoliers and/or musicians for those of you who want the chance to appear in an opera. I do not know how many readers of the newsletter will have singing roles (chorus or otherwise) but I am sure that some of you are among the singing performers.

In the last newsletter I asked about the Houston premiere of *Nixon in China* and audience reactions to it. I have read some the critics' reports, but critics are not the public, and in the long run an opera has to win over the public even in this day of the powerful Broadway critic. I heard word from Steve Slezak who had contact with relatives and friends who attended opening night of *Nixon*. Apparently many of the audience left at different points with the later departers applauded in the lobby by those who had left earlier!

As for the reaction to the music and libretto, the consensus was as might be expected: unsingable/unmusical for the most part and too static a libretto. How much action could there be at a state-ceremonial dinner--when no loves, hates, plots or intrigues are being exposed? Adams is no Verdi. Of course there are going to be critics who will support avant garde material for its own sake and will find musical value in anything new. The new generation appears to take to minimalism as the wave of the future. Many of the great composers in the past had to go through periods of turning off audiences, suffering their taunts and failing to be appreciated in one or another locale. Remem-

ber that Wagner had his problems as a representative of the then "new school" of extreme romanticism. Today there are still many who can't stand Alban Berg's *Lulu* or *Wozzek* (both of which fascinate me). Apart from the question as to the endurability of *Nixon in China*, there have to be new operas by new composers and audiences for them, otherwise the performing art will not survive except in "museums" such as the Metropolitan Opera. Don't get me wrong. I enjoy "museum pieces." I even collect them, but we should be grateful to the state-supported European houses that do put on new operas. In this country, and in England, the new and avant garde in singing lively arts are generally found in the so-called musicals (Sondheim, Bernstein, Webber, etc.). Perhaps the universities and musical colleges in this country should take up the challenge. Why can't you train instrumentalists and singers on new opera as well as on the tried and traditional? It is not going to be their steady diet. Schools of drama do it to train actors. Would more students attend a performance of *Akhnaten* (Glass) than of an old classical stand-by or a verismo piece of the early twentieth century?

If we are going to try to build audiences for the future we are going to have to confront this issue and find ways to attract the new generation. Let me hear your reactions.

November 12 Meeting Report

In the absence of Mona Shaw, Miriam Canter acted as facilitator. Members present discussed the problem of holding meetings on a weeknight when a Music School or Arts Center event is taking place. The consensus was that the Supers meeting could start earlier and finish in time to permit members to attend such events without much difficulty.

Professor Glass reported that the *Goose Girl* production was to be taken to the Burlington schools the next week. He also indicated that there is a possibility of getting Birgit Nilsson for a lecture/master class sometime in March or April, 1988, during her visit to the United States. Her visit will be part of the celebration of the 300th anniversary of the first Swedish settlement in this country. It remains to be seen if the invitation can be managed with respect to funds for stipend, travel, etc. The Supers discussed various ways money could be raised to help.

Miriam reported that the University of Iowa Foundation has set up an account for Music School Student

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Travel to be used as needed. The Supers agreed that this account should be open for donations without having to specify a benefit recital event or person. (The fund is open for donations at any time.) The group was reminded that there is also a Foundation account for donations to the University Opera Theater Fund. (Newsletter readers, take the hint!—Ed.)

Note was taken of the upcoming 100th anniversary of the birth of **Lotte Lehman** and **Beaumont Glass'** biography of the singer that will be released for the occasion. The Super's propose to hold a party on Saturday, **February 27th** honoring both events. Four Supers volunteered to serve as a committee to work out the details: **Hope Solomons, Marlene Stanford, Phyllis Evans, and Linda Behrendt.**

Looking ahead to the Spring opera, two Supers, **Anna Stranieri** and **Jean Kern**, volunteered to oversee the needs for the strike party.

The rest of the meeting was devoted to ways of promoting *Così*, how to tap the student audience, involve the *The Daily Iowan*, create placards for Cambus ad spaces, write series of articles for newspapers, etc. The ideas and suggestions flowed magically. The Supers will be happy to share them with **Peter Alexander** of the Arts Center Relations and help in any way they can.

January 11 Meeting Report

Mona Shaw led the meeting. Two new members were introduced: **Steve Munzenmaier** and **Barbara Bell**. The School of Music Concert and Recital Series Calendar (a copy is included with this newsletter) was handed out to members present. Members are encouraged to distribute them around the city, put them on bulletin boards, etc. Extra copies are available from **Mona Shaw** at the Music Building or by calling her.

Dr. Marilyn Somville, director of the School of Music, reported on a reception held for **Herald Stark** (former School of Music voice faculty and opera director from 1934-76) at the Hilton Palacio del Rio in San Antonio, Texas on December 29, 1987. The reception was given to honor Professor Stark and to announce the new scholarship fund that has been established in his name. More than 100 of Professor Stark's former and current students attended the event, which was held during the annual NATS (National Association of Teachers of Singing) Convention also held at the Hilton in San Antonio, December 26-30. The fund, which will be used to assist exceptional voice/opera students, is titled the **Herald Stark Opera Scholarship Fund** and will be handled by the University of Iowa Foundation.

The details for the **Evangeline Noël Glass** recital on February 27th were discussed. The program will be a typical **Lotte Lehman** recital and will start at 7:00 p.m. in Harper Hall, Music Building. Opera Supers will sponsor a reception for attenders at the home of **John Fitzpatrick** following the recital. Volunteers from among the members present at this meeting were sought to act as ushers for the recital.

It was decided to hold a reception for the students who will be singing in the **Metropolitan Opera Audition Preview Recital**. These are students who will be singing at the District Met competition in Des Moines, which leads to the Regional and ultimately the National Metropolitan Opera Audition. The recital is Tuesday, January 26 at 8:00 p.m. The reception will follow the recital in the lounge of the Music Building. All Supers are encouraged to attend the program to show their support for the local contestants.

It was announced that there will be patron tickets (\$25.00 each) for *Così* and a reception for patrons following the opening night performance. Supers will be asked to serve as host/hostesses for the reception although the food, etc. will be arranged by the Foundation.

Concerns were expressed about the way a similar reception was handled after last year's opera and steps will be taken to correct some of these problems.

The rest of the meeting was centered on promotional parties and receptions. It was decided that a single event for the press and community arts leaders and best held on a Friday, downtown, from 4:30-6:30 p.m. Details are to be worked out.

UI Opera Cast for *Così*

As is customary, the Spring Opera is double cast to permit more students to have the opportunity to sing roles. Dates for the opera are **Friday, April 29th at 8:00 p.m.** and **Sunday, May 1st at 2:00 p.m.** in **Hancher Auditorium**. The opera is being staged by UI Opera Theater director, **Beaumont Glass** and **James Dixon**, director Orchestral Studies, will conduct. Costumes and scenery will be designed by **Margaret Wenk**, the lighting designer is **David Thayer**. Along with the **UI Symphony Orchestra** the cast will include:

<u>April 29</u>	
Rosemary Lack	Fiordiligi
Barbara Buddin	Dorabella
Kristie Tigges	Despina
Joshua Breck	Ferrando
Wayne Neuzil	Guglielmo
Jeffrey Hook	Don Alfonso

May 1

Merry Belz.....	Fiordiligi
Tracy Quinto.....	Dorabella
Jean McDonald.....	Despina
Phil Koffron.....	Ferrando
Brian Burkhardt.....	Guglielmo
Jeff Fields.....	Don Alfonso

Original Cast for *Così* (1790)

The cast of the first performance of the opera which was given in Vienna on the 26th of February, 1790, consisted of Adriana Ferrarese del Bene (Fiordiligi), Louise Villeneuve (Dorabella), Vincenzo Calvesi (Ferrando), Francesco Benucci (Guglielmo), Francesco Bussani (Alfonso), and Dorotea Bussani (Despina). This cast was known to Mozart and his librettist da Ponte as the opera was being written. The information in the following comes from Brian Trowell's chapter in the English National Opera Guide, *Così fan tutti* and da Ponte's memoirs.

Adriana Ferrarese del Bene (so named as she came from Ferrara as did the sisters in the opera, an in-joke by da Ponte), about 35 years of age at the time, was da Ponte's mistress. When Mozart had heard her sing in other operas before *Così* was planned, he had not been impressed by her vocal abilities but acceded to da Ponte's wishes. It was said that by this time she was no great beauty, but da Ponte claimed, "She had fine eyes and a beautiful mouth." In a London appearance in 1785, she apparently impressed some reviewers as having a sweet voice and the ability to master the ornamental florid style of singing that was held to be in good taste then. However, it was conceded that she was not a good actress. Da Ponte wrote the role of Fiordiligi specifically for Adriana. Mozart for this part was able to exploit her wide range mannered singing style despite her dubious reputation as singer and actress. Da Ponte who was her champion defended her against all criticism. Apparently she had an impetuous nature that provoked ill feelings in others. She loved to tease rivals and make facetious remarks about them. Such behavior, and perhaps her relationship to da Ponte, led her to be dismissed from the opera company shortly after *Così*. Subsequently, da Ponte, too, was dismissed as he rashly tried to protect her.

Little is known about Louise Villeneuve, the Dorabella. It was stated that in contrast to Adriana, Louise was one of the great beauties of her time. Mozart composed three fine arias for her to be inserted into other composers' operas during August and October, 1789. She had sung in Vienna since 1788 in one of da Ponte's other collaborations (*Abore di Diana*). According to a review in the *Wiener Zeitung* she was "justly applauded for her charming

appearance, her subtle, expressive acting and her artistically beautiful singing."

Vincenzo Dalvesi, the Ferrando, was the leading lyric tenor in Vienna until 1794. He came to Vienna after successes in Parma and Venice. A review in 1790 described him as "one of the best tenors from Italy, who combine a voice naturally sweet, pleasant and sonorous with a technique which, without being mannered or overly cultivated, never fails to please our public." He was the highest tenor Mozart ever composed for.

The Guglielmo, Francesco Benucci, was one of the finest bass-baritones of his age and well-known to Mozart as his first Figaro and Leporello. He was considered as good an actor as singer. He had been the leading *buffo* in Venice in 1778-79. Benucci performed all over Europe and is said to have sung the first Mozart ever heard on the London stage: the duet *La ci darem la mano* from *Don Giovanni*. He was described as having "a very round, beautiful full bass voice" and was noted for his subtle underplaying of *buffo* roles and his ability to take on serious roles equally well.

The Bussanis (in the roles of Alfonso and Despina) were man and wife offstage. Francesco Bussani had settled in Vienna not only as a singer but as a stage manager. According to da Ponte he was "master of every trade save that of honest man." Da Ponte blamed him for trying to ruin *Figaro* by getting the authorities (censors) to refuse to allow dancers to be used in the Fandango scene of that opera. Mozart never wrote an aria for Bussani other than parts of the double roles he took in *Figaro* and *Giovanni* (Bartolo/Antonio in the former and the Commendatore/Masetto in the latter). He had a generous bass voice but was weak in the lower register. Bussani was noted to have an officious "gobbling turkey-cock manner" that may have been parodied deliberately by Mozart for Bartolo's *La vendetta* aria in *Figaro*. By the time of *Così*, he was 47 and may have been losing his ability to sustain a line. Whatever the reason, Mozart did not provide a proper aria for Don Alfonso in his opera.

Dorotea, Bussani's wife, had sung Cherubino but no other part for Mozart except Despina. Da Ponte disliked her as he did her husband. He claimed she gained her following by "grimaces and clown tricks." He also implied that she was unfaithful to her husband, making him "live a dog's life." There are accounts of her being more of an actress than a singer, with an attractive physique. Others were said to describe her as having a beautiful and charming chest voice that was used with good humour and mischievously (as Fidalma in Cimarosa's *The Secret Marriage*). Considering the dislike that both Mozart and da Ponte had for the Bussanis, it is remarkable that they were chosen for the opera. On the other hand with their personalities and their love of intrigue perhaps the pair provided the composer and his librettist the essence of the way Alfonso and Despina would function in *Così*.

Let not the foregoing descriptions of the original cast, how they may have been chosen for their parts, and how the parts may have been written to fit them dismay our current young singers who have been chosen for the roles this coming spring. But do take heed. Someday a new composer for a new opera may have one of you in mind, not only for the demands the music may make, but also for the characterization of the role.

Are opera composers nowadays fitting roles to specific persons that hope will sing in the premiere of the work?

Department of Notable Quotes

Without music life would be a mistake

—Friederich Nietzsche

God sent his Singers upon earth

With songs of sadness and of mirth.

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Where Gluck found his personal style by rescoring French tragedy, Mozart synthesized his form by combining the astute verbal art of the satirist with the deeply musical commentary of the romantic.

—Ethan Mordenn

The Splendid Art of Opera

I like an aria to fit a singer as perfectly as a well tailored suit of clothes.

—W.A. Mozart

one of his letters (1782)

In Così fan tutti the dying eighteenth century casts a backward glance over a period outstanding in European life for grace and charm and, averting its eyes from a new age suckled in a creed of iconoclasm, sings its swan-song in praise of civilization that has passed away forever.

—Sir Thomas Beecham

A Mingled Chime (1944)

The University of Iowa
School of Music

Miscellany

Don't forget the **Metropolitan Opera Preview Recital** on Tuesday, January 26, 8:00 p.m. in Clapp Recital Hall. Check your **School of Music Concert and Recital Series Calendar** for other events upcoming this semester. The School offers outstanding artists from on and off this campus, and events are usually free.

Also, remember **Evangeline Noël Glass'** recital with Beaumont Glass, accompanist on Saturday, February 27 at 7:00 p.m., Harper Hall, Music Building.

The Opera Supers of Iowa City Newsletter is sent as a service to Opera Supers. It is hoped that those who receive the newsletter, even though they may not be "active" Opera Supers, (attend meetings regularly etc.) will contribute in some way to our projects at least once during any given year.

The time for our next meeting has been changed from February 8 to **February 22**, since the Iowa Caucus Meetings are held on the prior date.

Important Numbers

Mona Shaw, Public Relations Coordinator.....	335-1667
Dwight Sump, Opera Production Manager.....	335-1153
Margaret Wenk, Opera Designer.....	335-2988
Arthur Canter, Newsletter Editor.....	338-1217
Miriam Canter, Hospitality.....	338-1217
Shirley Harrison, Costumes.....	337-5729
Mary Wall, Scenery.....	338-2618

***Reserve your Così
tickets today!***

Arthur and Miriam Canter
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